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On Marlow's Narrative in *Lord Jim*
— 1 —

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(1)

Lord Jim (1900) is a complicated novel which baffles the casual reader with its busy time shifts, apparently irrelevant digressions, and voices of the various witnesses mingled with the voice of the chief narrator Marlow. At the first reading the reader will find no small difficulty in coming at the mere sequence of events. At a more attentive second or third reading, *Lord Jim* becomes a different novel. The story itself, when disentangled, turns out to be a rather simple adventure story, while the moral situations involved become more complex and ambiguous. Once freed from the task of solving the factual mysteries of the novel, the reader, paying more attention to the way the story is told, finds that what seemed to be an exasperatingly perverse way of telling a story is a means by which to convey what can never be conveyed by a more straightforward way.

The difficulty of the novel is largely to be attributed to the intricacy of narration involving time shifts ; a narration is inserted within a narration which is inserted within another narration ; or, a narration reports several other narrations successively. With each change of narrator or speaker, the reader is made to go backward and forward in time. Since the greater part of *Lord Jim* consists of Marlow's narrative, his long "yarn" to a group of after-dinner listeners and his letter sent afterward to one of them, the intricacy of narration is, for the most part, the intricacy of Marlow's narration.

Lord Jim is the last of the three successive works of fiction in which Conrad uses Marlow as chief narrator. I have shown in another paper that the discourse situations of Marlow's narration in the first two, namely, "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness", present some differences which are related with the differences in depth and complexity of vision in the two stories.[1] I would like to examine Marlow's intricate narration in *Lord Jim* in terms of its discourse situation in order to have an objective description of its characteristics and help clarify the significance of the complexity of the novel. "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness" will be referred to for the purpose of comparison.

(2)

In examining the discourse situation of *Lord Jim*, I would like to adopt the same descriptive method of Leech and Short that is followed in my former paper.[2] In terms of narrative mode, the novel is roughly divided into three parts ; the first four chapters by omniscient third person narration, the middle thirty-one chapters made up of Marlow's evening talk, and the last ten in the form of Marlow's written account accompanied by a letter to the "privileged man". Then the discourse between author and reader (which is the novel itself) may be regarded as consisting of a successive occurrence of three subdiscourses. But in fact, the first subdiscourse encases the other two subdiscourses ; Marlow's evening talk and his written story are part of the message of the omniscient narrator. The reader is persistently reminded of the secondhand status of those narratives by the convention of graphology, the inevitable quotation marks heading every paragraph. Hence the discourse structure of *Lord Jim* is as is shown in the following figure 1. The figure is not exhaustive, for

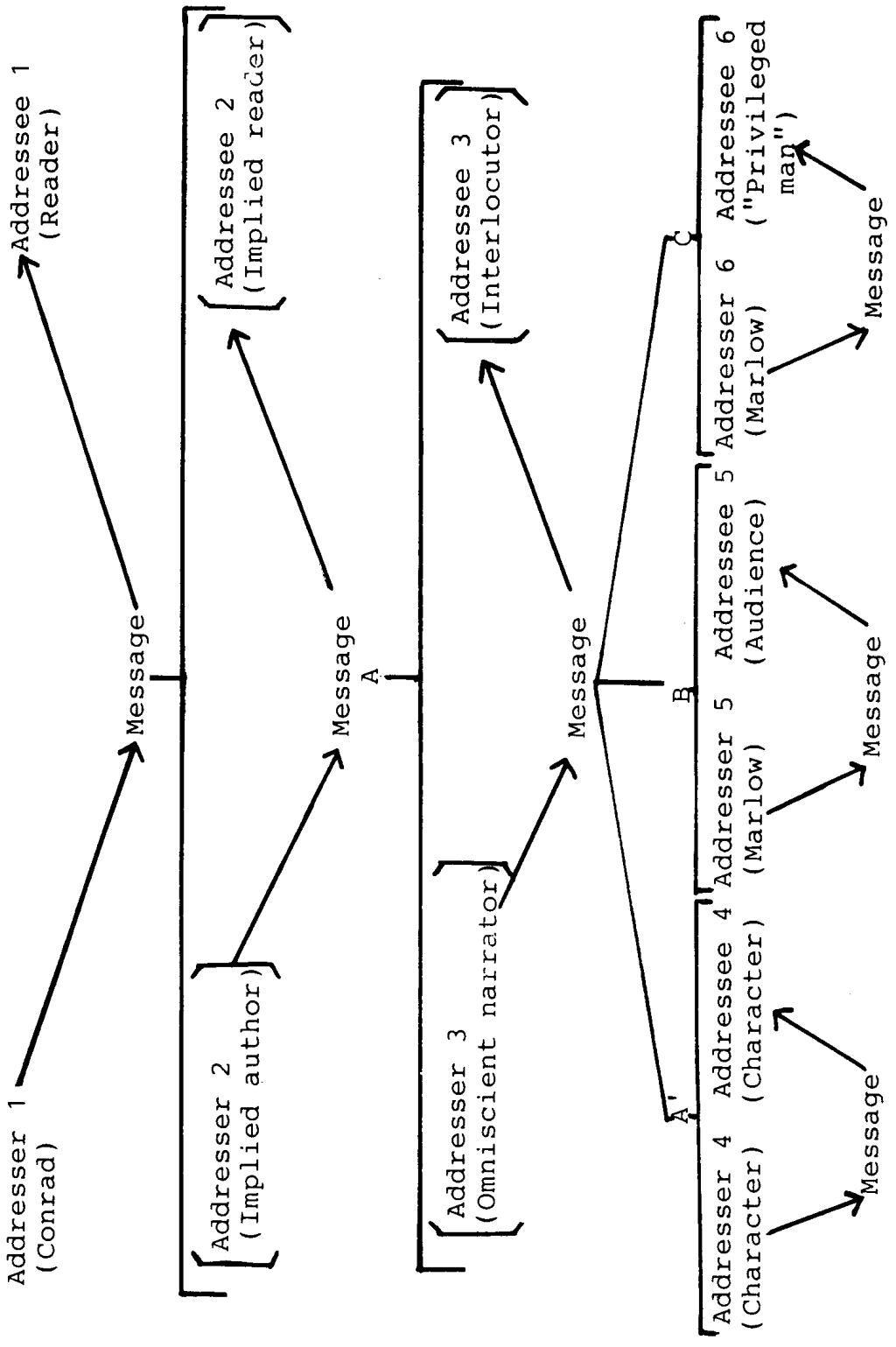
(Levels)
1
2
3
4
Addresser 1
(Conrad)
Addressee 1
(Reader)
Message
Addresser 2
(Implied author)
Addressee 2
(Implied reader)
Message
A
Addresser 3
(Omniscient narrator)
Addressee 3
(Interlocutor)
Message
B
A'
C
Addresser 4
(Character)
Addressee 4
(Character)
Addresser 5
(Marlow)
Addressee 5
(Audience)
Addresser 6
(Marlow)
Addressee 6
("Privileged man")
Message
Message
Message

Fig. 1

when, for example, Marlow reports a conversation between Jim and himself, or Jim's report of what other people said, more levels of discourse are to be added to the subdiscourse. This further complication of the discourse structure will be treated later. The letters A, B, and C are put on the three subdiscourses, and A′, on a discourse or conversation which takes place in the first four chapters. I will avoid repeating the notes given in my former paper on the figure of the discourse structure of "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness" and ask the reader to refer to the paper, especially pages 46-49. It will be noticed that in this diagram, in addition to the three pairs of square brackets around the usually unperceived discourse participants, i. e., implied author, implied reader, and interlocutor, another pair is put around Addresser 3, which shows that his presence is not perceived as he conveys his message in the impersonal third person narration. Thus the discourse level 3 is merged into level 1, which means that the reader tends to assume that Conrad himself is the primary narrator.

It is obvious that *Lord Jim* is another frame story, in which the subdiscourses B and C are the framed-in stories. The two framed-in stories being, after all, one story with two parts, the discourse structure of the novel seems little different from those of the other two Marlow stories, but the frame itself shows some difference in its discourse situation from those of the other stories. To describe the discourse situation of the frame will serve to define the framed-in story, or Marlow's narrative in *Lord Jim*.

(3)

The obvious features that characterize the discourse situation in the frame of *Lord Jim* are that the primary narrator is an om-

niscient third person narrator, and that Marlow's listeners are not identified. Another feature to be noted is that the frame, which is supposed to enclose the story, does not really enclose it. The first four chapters are a kind of prologue by the omniscient narrator introducing the hero and Marlow's yarn. At the beginning of Chapter 36, the narrator comes back to tell the end of Marlow's yarn and the arrival, more than two years later, of a packet containing Marlow's "last word of the story". After introducing briefly the subdiscourse C in this way, he never comes back to take care of the end of the novel. The frame seems to be open or imperfect at the end. The open "shape" of the frame is, I think, closely related to the mode of the first narrator's narration as well as to Marlow's status as narrator. To repeat almost word for word the brief definiton I have given in the former paper, the frame is a device of fiction for providing a plausible, realistic basis that makes even the strangest story acceptable. The narrator of the frame, then, needs to be reliable, either an impersonal, omniscient narrator, or if personalized, a trustworthy narrator whose point of view is objective and based on the common sense of the community. The first narrators of "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness", presumably the same person, belong to this latter class of narrators. Being a representative or spokesman of Marlow's audience of dependable, practical ex-seamen, they provide the extraordinary adventure of young Marlow, or the "unspeakable horrors" in the Congo, with a solid frame, as well as set the scene for the chief narrator at the beginning and draw the curtain at the end.

The first narrator of *Lord Jim*, on the other hand, does not take any trouble to close Marlow's narrative which he introduced with much elaboration. He does not seem to be such a dependable guide as a reliable narrator should be. After the manner of the

typical third person narrator of the traditional novel, he duly begins with the introduction of the hero, though not with his birth or childhood, but *in medias res*, with Jim working as a water-clerk in various Eastern ports. A third person narrator is usually omniscient and makes a show of freely imparting his information,[3] but the primary narrator of *Lord Jim* is, from the start, a narrator who has a tendency to refrain from telling everything he knows. The opening sentence of Chapter 1 is typical :

> He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.[4]

Instead of giving a piece of expository summary introducing the hero, the narrator brings the reader into immediate confrontation with him. He tells how Jim looks to "you" or to everybody, and pretends not to be sure of his exact height. Purposefully limiting his point of view to a man who may have come upon Jim in an Easters port, he gives up his omniscience for a moment. As Ian Watt points out, Conrad's impressionistic method can be seen operating in these opening words ; he begins by attracting the reader's attention with a strong visual impression.[5] Almost casually toward the end of the long second paragraph, the name of the hero is introduced. This way of introduction is, in a way, natural, for we usually come to know people, first by sight, then by name. Still the casualness of introduction is rather unusual, and moreover, the narrator chooses to tell us only the nickname, adding that Jim does not want his last name pronounced. Nor is the narrator's explanation of why Jim keeps the incognito adequate. He only gives such big words of judgment as "the Intolerable" and "his deplorable faculty" without

any confirming facts, but merely with an utterly non-committal term, "the fact". The narrator thus refuses to explain a known fact as if it were not worth mentioning and leaves the uninformed reader mystified.

This kind of mystification may not be unusual as a narrator's trick of stimulating the reader's curiosity. In fact, the first narrator seems to be going to take care of the aroused curiosity of the reader in the next paragraph, guiding him into Jim's past, presumably in search of "the fact" that has caused him to hide his identity. Jim's past history up to the time of the *Patna* episode is succinctly told in a fairly traditional, straightforward way. Making use of the privilege of omniscience, the narrator is very versatile ; he gives, in rapid succession, a long period of time condensed in one short paragraph, vivid close-ups of the excited scenes, beautiful unhurried descriptions of the sea, generic statements about sea-life, interspersing them with sudden glimpses of various people on the scenes. Though he tells us about Jim's state of mind, or takes his point of view not infrequently, especially in the training ship episode and on board the *Patna*, still he remains objective and even aloof.

Then at the moment of the sudden shock of the *Patna*, the first narrator ceases to be the fairly straightforward, informative narrator that he has been for some time. He strictly limits himself to the point of view of an uncomprehending observer. This is another instance of the trick of engaging the reader's mystified participation in the experience. But, instead of immediately involving the reader in the commotion of the amazed officers after the shock, the narrator brutally carries him into the police court of an Eastern port and makes him listen to Jim trying to tell his version of the *Patna* experience in the witness-box a month or so afterward. Staggering

the reader with a sudden shift of time and place, he partly waives the privilege of omniscience at the same time and lets Jim take up the *Patna* story where he has left off, while he himself is content with being the reporter of Jim's words and state of mind. He is not a faithful reporter, however. Against the reader's expectation of hearing the testimony of a participant in the incident, the narrator conveys little of it to the reader.

In this way, the first narrator who seems to have begun on his own leading the reader in search of "the fact" along the past history of Jim doubly disappoints him. Seeing that he has suggested in the first chapter that it is Jim's "keen perception of the Intolerable", or "his exquisite sensibility", that keeps him "retreat〔ing〕in good order towards the rising sun" (4), it may seem natural that he should give Jim a chance to tell the story from his own point of view, that is, to become an "I-narrator". The subdiscourse A′, most of which is the brief, intermittent report of Jim's testimony in the court, may be regarded as the vestige of what might have been *the* framed-in story. As it is, Jim is immediatily disqualified as a narrator, on grounds of his despairing sense of difficulty of making his truth understood after an attempt to give facts with "a meticulous precision of statement" (19). As he talks on in the witness-box, he feels himself "imprisoned" in "the serried circle of facts that〔has〕surged up all about him to cut him off from the rest of his kind" (*ibid.*), and unable to communicate with others. Some other narrator who will go through "the serried circle of facts" and brings Jim out together with "the fact" is needed.

In the fourth chapter, while this process of double disappointment is going on, Marlow is introduced as one of the court audience who, Jim feels, apart from the others, "seem〔s〕to be aware

of his hopeless difficulty" (21). Marlow is, then, destined as the second narraor to redress the double disappoistment, to tell what the first narrator would not tell and what Jim failed to tell. In other words, Marlow's narrative is introduced, after the strategic failures to tell a story, first in the third person, then in the first person, as another trial of telling the story in another mode of narration. Having virtually relinquished the role of narrator, the first narrator cannot come back to resume the story, nor to close it, unless just to help Marlow continue his narrative. He cannot but leave the frame open-ended.

The refusal on the first narrator's part to go on telling Jim's story is closely connected with his attitude toward Jim. Throughout the four chapters, the first narrator is never sympathetic to Jim, even when he writes from the hero's point of view. The tone of his narrative is always mildly ironical and aloof, sometimes even scornful. An obvious example of this is the title "Lord". It is only the first narrator (and Conrad who has given the novel its title) that calls Jim "Lord". The Malays title him "Tuan", which is better translated as either "Sir" or "Master".[6] The narrator seems to suggest by the incongruous combination of the hyperbolic translation of the title and the commonest nickname the ridiculous incongruity of an oridnary boy and his heroic aspirations, or, as Arnold E. Davidson puts it, that "as a lord he [is] always a sham".[7] To give another example : in the following excerpts, which are written from Jim's point of view, Jim's bravado in the one and his complacency in the other are both shown up by the effective use of the emphatic or depreciating words(my italics):

> The tumult and the menace of wind and sea now appeared *very* contemptible to Jim, increasing the regret of his awe at

> their *inefficient* menace. Now he knew what to think of it. It seemed to him he cared *nothing* for the gale. He could affront *greater* perils. He would do so—better than *anybody*. *Not a particle* of fear was left (6).
>
> Jim on the bridge was penetrated by the *great certitude* of *unbounded* safety and peace that could be read on the silent aspect of nature like the *certitude* of fostering love upon the *placid* tenderness of a mother's face (11-12).

Most of what the first narrator has to say about the hero, however, has already been told succinctly in the second and third paragraphs of Chapter 1 : with the phrases, "his exquisite sensibility" (with an ironical shade on *exquisite*), "elected to conceal his deplorable faculty, and "Lord Jim", the first narrator sums Jim up as "no good", with all his fine sensibility and good aspirations. The rest of the chapter and the next two exist to give the facts to confirm this view of Jim ; he fails in the rescue work ; being a tolerably good seaman, he does not have "the perfect love of the work" (7) and takes an easy, less dangerous berth ; he has a tendency to indulge in empty dreams of glorious achievements. His failure in the *Patna* accident is almost predictable.

This unsympathetic attitude of the first narrator is shared by the privileged man who, in Marlow's words, " [has] rushed into one or two places single-handed and came out cleverly without singeing [his] wings" (206) and who maintains "we must fight in the ranks or our lives can't count" (*ibid.*). In his eyes, the life of a young man who has failed and retreated to "conceal his deplorabe faculty" does not count. He will have no interest in such a man's inner feelings. Actually, he is the only man among the unnamed listeners who has

showed some interest in Jim's fate and is "privileged" to hear "the last word of the story." The others disperse at the end of Marlow's yarn, "without loss of time, without offering a remark" (204), seemingly showing no interest. All of them may not be so congenial listeners to Marlow as the four listeners in "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness" (especially in "Youth") are to him. The latter are, though unnamed, identified to be ex-seamen, which means that they have much in common with Marlow. Among the unidentified audience in *Lord Jim*, there may be some who have nothing in common with Marlow except that they happen to be Europeans living in the East. The auditors mostly keep silent during the talk, except for a negligent encouragement, "Well", or a mild reproof, "You are so subtle, Marlow" (58). Marlow's narrative is given, then, in general scepticism. The privileged man's interest in Jim is only the other side of the scepticism that he shares with the first narrator. He prophesies a "disaster" for Jim, if not the very disaster that is actually to take place. He is sure of his failure in Patusan, but, well, let's see what will happen....

Marlow's discourse situation is a rather unfavourable one ; his addressees do not seem to be interested in all that he has to say. The unidentified listeners to Marlow's yarn, who have some previous knowledge of the notorious *Patna* affair and its paticipants, may expect Marlow to give the circumstantial accounts of the affair by the eyewitnesses whom he has come to contact with, and perhaps also the motives of the participants in which they are naturally interested as men living in the East. The privileged man's chief interest will be what has become of Jim in Patusan, and Marlow satisfies his curiosity with a fairly informative, straightforward report of the events in Patusan, which, in a way, is necessary, for the addressee in this

discourse has no previous knowledge of them.[8] But what has interested Marlow throughout is Jim's motives, what he does with his failures, his inner feelings. "The thing is that in virtue of his feeling he mattered" (136), Marlow declares. To the privileged man and others, a "straggler" who has not hung on does not count much. But to Marlow, Jim is interesting because he is "a straggler yearning inconsolably for his humble place in the ranks" (137), because he is "one of us". Marlow's narrative then will have to be different from the narrative in the frame, in its mode of narration, in its tone, and in its focus of interest. Marlow undertakes to tell Jim's story in an utterly different way from the first narrator, that is, in his own way, focusing on what most interests him, while not forgetting to satisfy the curiosity of his audience about the facts.

The device of a frame usually aims at a contrast, and relativises the framed-in story. A most adventurous, romantic story, for instance, surrounded by a prosaic, everyday frame, will have its strangeness stand out and recognized as such, but paradoxically, by thus being surrounded and relativised, it will be reduced in strangeness and assimilated into the context of everyday life.[9] In "Youth", youth eager for adventure, contrasted with and smiled at by sedate middle age in the frame, is assimilated into exclamations of nostalgia at the closing of the story. In "Heart of Darkness", the contrast is between the primeval Congo, or the heart of darkness, and the present-day London, or the heart of light and civilization. When the extraordinary nightmarish story is told to the businessemen lounging on board, "with a great stir of lights [of ships] going up and going down,"[10] and closed with a new realization on the part of the first narrator that the tranquil waterway from the heart of civilization may "lead into the heart of immense darkness",[11] the

contrast is assimilated or synthesized (at least for the first narrator, for it is suggested that some of the listeners remain unimpressed by the story). Marlow's narrative in *Lord Jim*, on the contrary, is left in its contrast with the narrative in the frame, which means that it remains relativised, and that the narrator is exposed to irony and scepticism. When Marlow's narrative is relativised, then the contrastive narrative is relativised and exposed to irony, too. Usually the omniscient third person narrator who knows, understands, surrounds all, is supposed to offer reliable interpretative help. It is true that the first narrator of *Lord Jim* offers some interpretation of Jim, which is a severe ironic one. When he lets, first Jim and then Marlow, talk within the frame of his narrative, however, he admits the possibility of other interpretations, but instead of coming back to provide a point of view from which to look at these interpretations (including his own) in order to arrive at the right interpretation, he leaves his interpretation relativised. Unlike the usual omniscient narrator, the first narrator of *Lord Jim* is not entirely reliable, nor is the second narrator Marlow. Indeed, as J. Hillis Miller says, "in *Lord Jim* no point of view is entirely trustworthy".[12] Then we cannot properly assume the first narrator to be completely merged into the implied author as we did in the above diagram. Maybe we should take off the square brackets around Addresser 3, and also retain our first surmise that the novel is made up of the successive occurrence of three subdiscourses. (To be concluded.)

Notes :

1. Keiko Marukawa, "On the Frames of Conrad's 'Youth' and 'Heart' of Darkness," *The Journal of the Faculty of General Education of Sapporo University*, 25 (September 1984), pp. 45-66.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

3. As Wayne C. Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961) amply argues and demostrates, the author or implied author, however impersonal or objective, is always in control of and chooses what we read. Therefore, a full, unreserved information is an illusion on the part of the reader manipulated by the author.
4. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900 ; ed. Thomas C. Moser, New York ; W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), p. 3 ; hereafter numerals in parentheses after a cited text refer to the pages in this volume.
5. Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : Univ. of California Press, 1979), p. 293.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
7. Arnold E. Davidson, *Conrad's Ending : A Study of the Five Major Novels* (Ann Arbor : UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 29.
8. This is one of the reasons why those events are told with few changes from their original chronological order and, in consequence, *Lord Jim* is criticised for the disparity in method of the *Patna* and Patusan parts.
9. See Ryo Nonaka, *Shosetsu no Hoho to Ninshiki no Hoho* (Tokyo ; Shohakusha, 1970), pp. 30-33.
10. Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness", in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* (1902 ; Collected Ed. London : J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946), p. 48.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
12. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1982), p, 31.